

# The Grave That Knows My Bones

by

Sarah Servie

March, 2011

Director of Thesis: John Hoppenthaler

Major Department: English, Creative Writing

*The Grave That Knows My Bones* focuses on the relationship between a WWII and Vietnam veteran and his son. The story is of my grandfather, a hardened and disciplined soldier, my father, a boy who grew up troubled by confusion and whose many difficult life circumstances still bewilder him to this day, and me, the daughter who attempts to better understand the family legacy that I've inherited. Through vignettes of creative nonfiction interspersed with poetry, this thesis examines generational shifts in ideas of the purposes of family structure as well as how the family structure is affected by a post-war patriarch and the burdens he carries.



The Grave That Knows My Bones

A Thesis

Presented to the Faculty of the Department of English

East Carolina University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Sarah Servie

March, 2011

© Sarah Servie, 2011

The Grave That Knows My Bones

by

Sarah Servie

APPROVED BY:

DIRECTOR OF  
DISSERTATION/THESIS: \_\_\_\_\_  
John Hoppenthaler, MFA

COMMITTEE MEMBER: \_\_\_\_\_  
Alex Albright, MFA

COMMITTEE MEMBER: \_\_\_\_\_  
Liza Wieland, PhD

CHAIR OF THE  
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH: \_\_\_\_\_  
Jeffrey Johnson, PhD

DEAN OF THE GRADUATE  
SCHOOL: \_\_\_\_\_  
Paul J. Gemperline, PhD

For my father, who lived it.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank the members of my committee for being supportive and nurturing educators as well as eternally willing readers. I especially thank John Hoppenthaler for his never-ending patience and insight. I do not think this project would have been completed without his kind words and constant encouragement. Finally, I thank my father for his honesty and for allowing me full creative license to tell his amazing stories.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Monument for Myths.....	1
Epilogue.....	57



## MONUMENT FOR MYTHS

I stare at your cemetery,  
suspicious of stones and crosses,  
brass plaques of strangers,  
the uneasy feeling that I am eavesdropping.  
Uncomfortable silence makes me cringe  
like an outsider; the dead hush up when I enter.

This place hides your mysteries,  
seals the vault with an epitaph:  
raised letters I trace to decode.

Under this streaked and heavy sky  
I vow to unriddle you, pull the past  
out of these grounds. You will rise  
bone by dusty bone.

Dad pours a scotch when he talks about his father. His hands, wrinkled and spotted after sixty-seven years, are still strong and certain as he unscrews the bottle and pours single-malt into a tumbler. I got him the bottle during my trip to Scotland this past summer, and he only brings it out on “special occasions.” Foreign indulgences are rarities in North Carolina, so Dad takes advantage of what he can.

He stops his pour, cuts his eyes up at me, then adds a splash more to the glass. The corners of his eyes crinkle into fine lines. He says, “Dad always said if you’re going to make a drink, you’d better make it with authority,” while recapping the bottle and placing it back into the liquor cabinet. The doors shut with a familiar, hollow thud.

The den is Dad’s domain. An old sleeper sofa that’s been recovered countless times and sags a bit in the middle, a blue recliner, and a wing-back are all arranged around a long-out-of-style 1970s coffee table that’s always covered in *TIME* magazines and day-old newspapers. There used to be a cut-glass ash tray stained gray from years of use on that table, but Dad has since given up his cigarettes. Nobody touches the clutter because it covers drink rings that are probably close to thirty years old. There’s a boxy TV on a ledge in the corner that gets terrible reception, but Dad can still get football and the news, so he doesn’t complain.

I sit down in the striped wing-back, pull my feet up underneath me and hug my knees. At twenty-four, I still curl up to listen to Dad like I did when I was a little girl. Maybe being home just reminds me of childhood. The temperature has finally started to drop, and I think about reaching behind me to pull down an afghan from the back of the chair.

Dad pads over to the couch in socked feet and plaid pajama pants. The shirttail of his Oxford is untucked. It is not unusual for Dad to combine the dress shirt he wore all day with

flannel PJs. Watching him move I am reminded of my grandfather – the way he holds his drink from underneath the glass, the stiffness of his spine, and how his profile catches the light from the brass lamp by the sofa. That Servie nose is a trait that even I inherited.

But I can't remember enough. I don't know who my grandfather was except for an old, white-haired man I used to visit as a kid. I had always heard stories about my grandfather's military career and thought of him as a soldier, even though he had been retired since before I was born. I never knew him as a young guy, the strapping man in olive-colored fatigues of whom Dad had shown me pictures. The man I have any actual memories of was aging and stiff, but with a crushing handshake that was a lasting reminder of the strength he possessed. I remember he turned from left to right at the waist instead of turning his head, his spine permanently fused together in places from years of landing during high altitude parachute jumps.

My parents used to take me to his single-story ranch home, small and neat, the exact opposite of our large beach box where my parents were raising four children. Anne, my German step-grandmother, Granddaddy Servie's third wife, shared the tiny house with him. Anne spoke broken, throaty English, and though she's been dead for almost seven years, I can still hear her saying, "Oh, Albert!" as she slapped my grandfather on the knee.

Their house always smelled like German potpourri. Grandma Anne kept an ornate silver serving dish filled with scented leaves and pine cones on the dining room table. Though I don't remember anyone ever eating at that table, it was always set for company with rolled linen napkins bound in wooden rings. A miniature witch dressed in dirndl on a dried vine

broomstick hung from the dining room doorway. I used to watch her spin in the wind from the air vent.

I always remember vacuum tracks in the carpet. And uncomfortable furniture dressed with chenille throws. Tiny flecks of glitter, barely noticeable, glinted in the divots of the popcorn ceiling, and I would stare at them and imagine they were tiny holes where sunlight filtered through.

My sister and I would sit stiffly on their couch and listen while the adults talked over our heads. Every once in a while Granddaddy would offer us a 7-Up, and he'd even make our drinks in glass tumblers like those my parents used. I could hear the ice clink into the glasses, the release of the 7-Up bottle as my grandfather unscrewed the lid. The ice cracked under the heat of the soda. The tumblers had diagrams of ship's sails on them, and I remember trying to make my 7-Up last as long as possible so I could keep my glass and look at the pictures. My sister and I were even given cocktail napkins and imagined we were drinking martinis with skewered olives just like the adults.

Dad sets his drink on the table and leans back into the couch cushions. He slides his feet back and forth a couple of times on the floor. His eyes seem so far away from me, the brown irises fading into hazel. I tilt my head slightly to avoid the lamp's glare on his glasses. He's looking across the small room, as if beyond me, or through me. I ask him to tell me about my grandfather.

\*

We're kicking past dusty cardboard boxes in the garage, Dad and I, looking for the one that contains all of my grandfather's military records. The garage smells like moth balls and old cats, and I wave my right arm out in front of me to clear any spiders' webs that are invisible in the dim light from the single dirty window of the garage bay. My bare feet are cold on the hard floor and they flap against the cracked concrete as I step carefully to avoid any unseen bugs. Dad climbs over my rusty bike to reach a shelf in the back of the garage. From the shelves, a container of screws falls to the floor, and I hear him curse under his breath as he bends at the knee to pick it back up.

Dad runs his hand along a stack of boxes, as if categorizing and sizing each one up. "I think this is it," he says and slides a plain brown box from the top of the shelves. He passes it down to me. The box is rectangular and dusty, not too heavy for me to hold. I get a strange feeling cradling the stored history that links our three generations. I carry the box back into the house, and Dad and I start unloading its contents on the kitchen table.

I heard a saying once that "you must empty a box before you fill it again." The box contains less than I had imagined. Three albums, probably assembled at some point by my Grandma Anne in an effort to preserve the papers that documented my grandfather's life, lay stacked on top of one another. Two are brown faux leather with the word "Photos" etched into the front covers. The other is a 1970s style light-green felt binder that is rusting at the rings' hinges.

I handle the notebooks and albums that haven't been touched in years, place them carefully on the table, and pause to look at the box's vacant interior. The hollow box glares back at me, flaps splayed open as if in opposition to my exploration. My grandfather's whole life

housed in a single container – papers, pictures, commendations, citations, yellowed at the corners and thin as tissue. I’ve emptied this casket – how will I ever refill it?

As I thumb through the albums, pages cracking at the glued binding, my grandfather’s Parachutist Qualification card falls loose. The card is laminated, but worn and stained. I imagine him passing it through his fingers, bending it at the corners. “82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division” is written at the top, and his name is printed in all-capital typeset – M/SGT ALBERT SERVIE JR. The date stamp reads “7 May 1953,” the day after my father’s tenth birthday. I remember my dad telling me once that my grandfather valued his jump wings more than anything else.

Dad picks up one of the albums and turns to a citation for my grandfather’s award of the Silver Star. I can hear the tone stiffen in Dad’s voice: “You have to respect a man who did what my father did. He was one tough sonofabitch. He may have had his flaws as a father, but he was my hero.” That word “hero” hits me in the chest, drums into me with the weight of all my father’s sixty-seven years.

I take the album from my dad’s hands and read over the citation. This is the first time I have seen the details of my grandfather’s experience in war. I grew up hearing stories and understanding that there were certain things my grandfather was part of that I was not supposed to ask about. I feel a little embarrassed – like I just walked in on something that was not meant for me to see.

*For gallantry in action: Sergeant Major Servie distinguished himself by gallantry in action on 3 February 1966 while serving as an advisor to an irregular task force composed of Vietnamese and Americans in the Republic of Vietnam. Sergeant Major Servie demonstrated courage, professional competence and loyalty when the helicopter in which he was a passenger lost power and crashed due to enemy ground fire. Although painfully injured in the crash, he managed to extricate all personnel except one pinned*

*beneath the aircraft, from the wreckage. The aircraft, subjected to increasingly heavy and accurate enemy small arms fire, had started to burn and the ammunition aboard the helicopter had started to explode. Realizing the aircraft was imminently going to explode and that his trapped comrade would be killed in the explosion, Sergeant Major Servie disregarded his personal safety, only seconds before the aircraft was completely destroyed by a terrific explosion. Sergeant Major Servie though suffering from a head and arm wound, proceeded to mark a landing zone for the rescue helicopter, while simultaneously firing suppressive fire into the attacking enemy force. Sergeant Major Servie's conspicuous gallantry in action was in keeping with the highest traditions of the United States Army and reflects great credit upon himself and the military service.*

The citation is mixed in among other papers, unceremoniously, seemingly uncharacteristic of the third-highest honor awarded by the US Army. Other citations follow: three Bronze Stars, the Air Medal, countless letters of appreciation and commendation, Special Forces Training Group Certificate of Achievement, and HALO Parachutist Training Certificate marked with the Special Forces "De Oppresso Liber" distinctive insignia.

Dad flips to a Bronze Star citation, swells in the chest as he turns the page around to me.

*By direction of the President the Bronze Star Medal (First Oak Leaf Cluster) is presented to Sergeant Major Albert Servie, Jr. United States Army for distinguishing himself by outstanding meritorious service in connection with ground operations against a hostile force in the Republic of Vietnam during the period March 1964 to September 1964. Through his untiring efforts and professional ability, he consistently obtained outstanding results. He was quick to grasp the implications of new problems with which he was faced as a result of the ever changing situations inherent in a counterinsurgency operation and to find ways and means to solve those problems. The energetic application of his extensive knowledge has materially contributed to the efforts of the United States Mission to the Republic of Vietnam to assist that country in ridding itself of the*

*communist threat to its freedom. His initiative, zeal, sound judgment and devotion to duty have been in the highest tradition of the United States Army and reflect great credit on him and on the military service.*

It is no wonder my father beams whenever he talks about my grandfather's military career. Words like "meritorious" and "freedom" and "gallantry" and "tradition" create an image of a man who represented the American ideal. From this citation, it is difficult to decipher exactly what happened that day in Vietnam. So much of the language caters to enhancing public opinion of a war not many people supported, that I have to wonder if there was a reason my grandfather never bragged about his exploits in war. My grandfather took on a persona that was bigger than he was—created a shadow around himself to disguise any imperfections.

I look up at my father with a million questions in my eyes. He nods at me knowingly and lets out a long, audible breath.

\*



## GUILT

"I was that which others did not want to be...I have cried, pained, and hoped – but most of all, I have lived times others would say were best forgotten."

--Anonymous

I rooted through your belongings,  
papers, pictures, buried in a box:  
cardboard casket at the closet's bottom.

I found these words you wrote,  
copied in cheap ballpoint on an index card,  
penned apology left for whom?

Your capitalized print treads heavily,  
trails downward in slightly crooked rows.  
Scratched Ts are unnamed cemetery plots.

The story of my dad's early childhood is one that I find difficult to talk about. Many times I have wanted to write about what happened to him growing up, as if putting his story down on paper would somehow be retribution for the crimes that were committed against him. Perhaps my difficulty lies in the fact that my anger and sadness about Dad's life are tied up in the present. I impose my feelings about events I never experienced onto history that Dad now considers to be water under the proverbial bridge.

My grandfather, Albert, married his high school sweetheart in Indiana in 1942. Her name was Helen, and all I know about her is that she was young, probably about seventeen-years-old, and she was beautiful. A year later, in May of 1943, my father, David Michael, was born. To my knowledge, there are no pictures of this event, the birth of their only child. I wonder what my father looked like as an infant, if he always had dark hair and the round Servie nose.

From here, my understanding of the timeline is a bit foggy, as little is known about the period of time that my grandfather was married to Helen. My grandfather never discussed his marriage to Helen and kept all of the details about her very secret. Almost all the information the family has about her is through a distant aunt who liked to keep tabs on everyone and would occasionally have some gossip to share.

My grandfather was drafted into World War II and spent a significant amount of time overseas. At this point in his military service, I don't think he knew the military lifestyle would become his career. I like to imagine that he was preparing to attend a university, and that he had big plans for his future and that of his family. I'm sure he just wanted the war to be over and to be able to come home to his wife and child as quickly as possible.

However, while my grandfather was at war, Helen had an affair and became pregnant with another man's baby. I try to put myself in her position, try to justify her indiscretions with loneliness and the uncertainty of her husband's return. And she was young. Perhaps she didn't know any better or was caught up in a relationship that could have been appropriate had she not been married right out of high school. Helen gave the out-of-wedlock child up for adoption before my grandfather's return but not before giving the baby my grandfather's last name.

When Granddad came back to Indiana and my father was almost two-years-old, he discovered what all had transpired in his absence and was furious that a bastard child had been stamped a *Servie* — the name of which he was so proud. Though the law at the time virtually always sided with the mother in the custody of children, my grandfather was able to take my dad away from his mother. Dad says he never saw his mother again.

\*

## I. FLASHBACK

She was the first of your secrets,  
a stranger you refused

ever to resurrect: hollow silhouette.  
She stole the marrow from your bones, stabbed holes

in unpatchable places. You carried  
her face, dim remembrance, a pit in the gut.

But did you ever relive her  
softness? Brood over her slantwise smile?

And when she made you a father,  
did you hum *Helen, I love you*,

lips gluing your confession  
into the heat of her neck?

“Sometimes I think I remember her,” Dad says during a rare discussion about his biological mother. “I think I have this memory of being pushed in a baby carriage, an old fashioned pram, by my mother. I can’t make out her face in the memory—it’s like a dream where your brain can’t fill in the gaps.”

Dad’s face is devoid of emotion. He looks blankly at me while describing what is, quite possibly, the only connection he has to the woman who gave birth to him. He laughs a little at the absurdity of his memory, and even suggests that maybe he made it up. I stare at him, unable to hide the shock on my face.

“Well honestly, Sarah, how do I know I remembered that image when I couldn’t begin to tell you what she looked like?”

At sixty-three, he hadn’t ever even seen a photograph of his mother. I cannot understand this. I think about my own mother and all the warm memories we share. I remember, vividly, my mother’s presence in my childhood. I can still hear her humming the notes to “My Favorite Things” before bedtime. When I look in the mirror, I see her eyes looking back at me; I see her wide-set, downturned mouth. I know where I came from. I am devastated that my father does not know this luxury.

About four years ago, I decided to find a photo of Helen to show Dad. I refused to accept that this woman simply vanished from existence, and I was convinced that I could somehow find a record of her. After quite a bit of Googling, I thought I might find Helen in a yearbook from Garfield High School, the school she was attending just before her marriage to my grandfather. Apparently, he went to Gerstmeier Technical High School, a college preparatory school. It is possible that they met through mutual friends.

Archivists at the local library in Terre Haute were able to dig up the annual from the last year Helen was at Garfield. They scanned the photograph and sent it to me. I remember feeling so successful, like I had really accomplished a great feat by locating the picture, but when the picture came in the mail I was terrified to open it. What if she didn't look the way Dad had imagined her? What if he didn't look like her at all?

The grainy, black-and-white photograph was a group shot of the Garfield High School junior class. In the middle row was my grandmother, the woman Dad had wondered about for over sixty years. She was thin and had dark hair. She was dressed in a skirt and blouse, typical of the fashion of the times. I handed Dad the photograph and watched him hold the paper in both hands. He stared quietly at the blurry picture for a few minutes, and I waited for his response.

"Well, I'll be damned," he said. "That's my mom."

\*

## II. FLASHBACK

You said once you thought you remembered  
her black hair backlit, fiery against the sun,  
as she pushed your carriage. But your splintered  
recollection deceives you, lost like her hum,

toneless and static. Years erased her face,  
smudged hollows for eyes, wiped a blurred  
mouth that never speaks. Retrace  
this phantom. She still walks with you.

Secretly, I find her photograph – still  
image of a woman whose silhouette  
resembles my own. I worry I've filled  
her features long before I knew their threat.

Her face is our shared legacy;  
I am regret's unsuspecting progeny.

My dad told me once that until he was five-years-old he believed he had two fathers. One father was "Daddy Dave," his paternal uncle who lived in Terre Haute, Indiana. Dave was a burly Frenchman who worked for the railroad and often took his nephew to bars and pool halls where they would sit and order root beers while Dave smoked a pipe. Dave taught my father about the trains; Dad said he remembers meeting a conductor and was allowed to wear his cap. He saw men shoveling coal into the engine's furnace and was mesmerized by the burning and black soot.

"Daddy Dave" raised my father until 1949, when "Daddy Albert," my dad's biological father, returned home from the War and was in a position to take him home. "Daddy Albert" was a soldier. He had brown boots so shiny Dad said he can still remember seeing his reflection in them. On one of Albert's visits to Terre Haute on leave, my father became so excited to see him that he jumped up his father's leg and tried to stand on the tops of his feet. Albert moved his son off him, and with a controlled tone demanded that his boots not be scuffed.

\*



MY FATHER, AGE 5, 1948

In Terre Haute, Indiana,  
he rides trains to nowhere. Groaning soot-black  
engines ache to the cylinders,  
crankpins strained in clank and puff.  
Smokestacks cough out exhaust against skies,  
blurring over faint, nameless stations.

Chugging of the train quiets him to dream  
metallic-motor horses, clipped and tramping,  
tails like cables snapping against their hides.  
The beasts chase horizons  
scarred by the machinery of their hooves.

*Where do you go, he wonders,  
When you do not know the road to get there?*

When Dad was almost six-years-old, his father came to Terre Haute and offered him a very serious proposition: "How would you like to have a new mother?"

After being asked this question, Dad says he remembers wondering if he were being evaluated in some sort of test. Was this a trick question? I imagine him shrugging his shoulders, his skinny arms limp at his sides. He said he responded, "Sure, that sounds fine."

In his time away from Terre Haute, my grandfather had met a woman from the mountains of North Carolina named Evelyn. He married her and had made plans to get my father from Indiana and move him to live with his newly patched-up family. Dad says the best thing he remembers about the move was the drive from Indiana to North Carolina. "It was like a whole new world," he told me once. "I thought we were going to keep driving forever and never see the end of it."

\*

## END OF A REVERIE

You remember a house on a hill,  
white with black slatted shutters,  
dunes sloped into green distances  
unmeasured in memory.

You were careful not to scuff new shoes  
running between trees toward a stream,  
its rippling an extravagant discovery.

You thought maybe God lived there,  
breathing in trills of a tern or  
alive in needling light through branches.

You knelt by the water to skip stones, but  
slipped on rocks upturned and jagged.  
You stood to see the cut in your knee,  
redness running off in tiny tributaries:  
the first scar.

In the den the TV is playing the news, but Dad has it turned down too low to hear what the broadcasters are saying. He looks at me and his eyebrows tense together over his squarish glasses.

"I never really knew if I was loved," Dad admits, and I can see him craving a cigarette even though he quit the habit at least five years ago. If he had a lighter, he would be flicking it absent-mindedly. He muses, "I used to think Dad loved our dog more than me," and laughs while shaking his head. He takes a sip from his drink before telling me a story about Gabriel, the English bulldog that was his childhood pet.

Gabriel was the runt of his litter, small and brindled with a severe under-bite. He snorted constantly due to breathing problems caused by his flattened nose, was prone to skin irritations, and could often be found lying on the cold linoleum floor of the kitchen. Gabriel was so ugly he was cute, and he quickly became my grandfather's best friend.

"When Dad got back from his first tour in Korea, he was really worried that Gabriel wouldn't remember him." My father's voice is even and low. I can see him start to trail off, the way he does when he remembers things that haven't come to him in a while.

"When Dad came into the house, Gabe just sat there on the floor shaking, and we thought maybe he was scared. But then he pinned his ears back and took off on a tear around the house, crying and barking. Dad picked Gabriel up and cradled him in his arms like a baby. He even kissed him."

I listen to my father's story, allowing him uninterrupted time to recall his memories. But what he doesn't tell me is more interesting to me than his flashbacks. Though he would never

admit that he was hurt by the experience, I can't help but wonder what other reason could make him still remember this event so many years later.

I imagine my ten-year-old father standing off to the side as the family dog received more attention. Maybe he pushed his glasses up, tugged at his shirttail, and let out a long breath. He probably swallowed back the rising lump in his throat, the happiness of his father's homecoming dampened by complete and suffocating disappointment.

"Yeah, Dad loved that dog..." my father says. He clears his throat and adjusts the pillows on the couch. I change the subject.

\*

VIETNAM, 1965

Helicopter blades whip up a swell of dust;  
fatigues slash at your legs.  
Every man's rifle is shoulder-slung  
across broad backs: stakes holding bodies upright.

I cannot hear the screams of a Vietnamese boy,  
his hollow mouth a wide and silent O.  
I cannot know what you told him  
as you reached out and pulled him into your chest.

I got to tell you, Dad was tough on me growing up. I remember it was a Saturday morning and Mom and I were in the kitchen of that old Army Housing Complex we used to live in out by Fort Bragg. Her kitchen was always sunny, light shining in through the window above the sink. The walls were yellow, which Mom thought was a color that brightened things up. I think she was frying up some sausage, or it might have been bacon; the eggs had already been placed on a serving dish at the table. Martha Anne and I were seated at the table—I don't see her much anymore, but you know I love my sister. Mom looked out into the backyard, rearranged some of what she liked to call "whatnots" that had begun collecting dust on the shelves flanking the window.

Dad pushed open the swinging door that connected the kitchen and dining room. He was dressed in olive colored work pants and a white undershirt, his biceps curving out from beneath the short sleeves. He crossed the green linoleum floor with his heavy steps, the weight of his walk causing the floor to sigh in places. He sat down in his chair and began spooning eggs onto the plate he took from the stack at the end of the table.

"How was your evening last night, Mike?" he asked me, the tone slightly suspicious.

"It was fine," I responded. "I went to the movies with all the neighborhood guys."

The previous week I had been on restriction, probably for cutting up in school or for poor grades—it doesn't seem to matter now. I hadn't been allowed to work or receive an allowance, so Dad knew I didn't have any money to be doing anything on the weekends with my friends.

"How did you pay your way?" The question was filled with implication.

I answered, "Oh, Monk paid for me because I didn't have any money. I guess I'll pay him back later."

"And that doesn't bother you?"

"No."

As I scooped a forkful of eggs into my mouth, I felt the sting of Dad's hand hitting my jaw. I fell out of my chair, skidded across the linoleum, and slammed against the row of pine cabinets on the other side of the kitchen. Dad pushed his chair back, letting it scratch against the floor. He got up and steadily walked toward me as I slumped stunned and breathless on the floor.

"Have enough pride in yourself to make your own way in this world," he said. He walked out the back door. The screen slammed shut behind him.

\*

I don't remember where we were going, but my dad and I drove there in his Jeep. It was cold outside, must have been December or January, and the square of sun in my lap was keeping me warm. Dad was staring straight ahead, squinting into the light, his right hand curled loosely over the top of the gray steering wheel.

"Do you know why I love you?" he asked me, the question filtering like dust motes into the sun.

"Why?"



“Because I know that you love me,” he said, and the simplicity filled the space between us.

\*

I think it was summer of 1955 and we must have been about twelve or thirteen. It had been a long school year filled with the kinds of classes I never felt I was good at. Math was especially difficult for me, and I had some disappointing report cards that proved it. I was always the funny guy, looking to crack up my buddies and get a laugh out of anybody who would listen to me. I often fell back on my class clown routine to win friends, if not approving looks from my teachers. I had been running around with the neighborhood kids, most of them Army brats like me, and we were anxious to get out of the classroom for a few months and have the summer all to ourselves. We spent the months trying to find things to do to keep ourselves occupied and take our minds off the North Carolina heat.

We ran through the woods, a few miles from our Army housing development in the neighborhood near Fort Bragg, inventing games and different ways to beat each other up. It was so hot in Fayetteville, dust bowl of North Carolina, like the sun poured into the dirt and just baked there all day. We stomped through underbrush, light strobing through branches and highlighting the dirt-smudged faces of my friends. BB gun at my side, I marched in fields where battles between the neighborhood delinquents often resulted in being shot in the ass with those devil pellets. I still don't know why we thought those games were a good idea.

Our gang did everything together that summer. I remember sneaking up to the spot where the older high school couples would park their cars at night to make out. We would stop

by the corner grocery to buy some Tampa Jewels or Rum Crooks. Like the old gangsters, we smoked the cigars all the way up the hill letting the downdraft carry the ashes.

Thinking back on it, I don't know how we got away with buying those cigars. We might have told the clerk we had been sent on an errand by our fathers to bring home their favorite smokes—they would believe almost anything in those days. We never had any trouble getting the stuff we wanted, especially if we pushed Robert, the oldest-looking member of the group, up to the counter to do the talking.

Eventually, we grew tired of spying on the high school kids on the hill; we were hard up for something to do. We were wandering around one evening just after sundown, and found a watermelon patch that was owned by some local old farmer. The patch was overflowing with full, ripe watermelons. The vines sagged from the weight of the fruit, like the patch was submerged in its wealth. The temptation was palpable.

Suddenly that watermelon patch became a battlefield. Just like our fathers went out on military maneuvers in the field, we became soldiers on enemy lines enacting scenes from the war stories we had heard and braving imaginary grenade explosions. I can't remember who threw the first watermelon, but I heard it hit the ground near me and felt the juice and seeds explode, splattering out onto my legs and shorts. It was like time froze for an instant, and I made the split decision to retaliate.

What happened after that was a blur. Must have been about six of us just launching watermelon after watermelon at one another, screaming out battle cries, and pretending to be gunned down. I could taste the watermelon as I slung it from my face, the pink pulp still dripping from the ends of my hair. My glasses had a film of red across them. I had to stop

several times and wipe them clean. Somebody lobbed the final watermelon grenade that drummed into my torso. I was in the midst of an overly dramatic death fall, clutching my wounded side, when the old farmer stepped out onto his porch.

He fired one warning shot from his rifle and we all stopped, still as stone – dropped to the ground on our bellies and tried to make ourselves as flat as possible. I could feel watermelon guts squishing under the weight of my body, the wetness warm as real blood in the summer heat. I heard him pump the rifle a second time and start running towards us in the patch. He was so close I could hear the swish of his overalls and the metallic sound of his suspender clasps. He was barely visible in the dusk, just a hazy outline of shadow against the fading pink and orange of the sky.

All I could think to do was run. I pushed myself up off the ground and started towards the house as fast as I could possibly go. I could barely make out the sound of my buddies scattering into the woods over the thud of my heartbeat in my ears and branches breaking under each stomp of my feet. I tripped over an exposed root that sent a fiery sting all the way up from my toes. I stumbled forward and my glasses were knocked from my face. Panicked and blind, my already heavy breathing quickened in fear. I dropped to my knees and groped around for them in the dark. Somehow my fingers felt a smooth lens and I grabbed the glasses, shoved them on with the flat of my hand.

I finally came to the clearing on the other side of the woods and slowed to a jog as I turned down our street. I made it back to the house and paused at the front door to assess the damage. My white t-shirt and khaki shorts were completely covered in pink and red watermelon juice stains, grass smears, and clumps of dirt. I brushed as much off as I could and

stomped some excess mud from my shoes before gently pulling open the screened door and going inside.

Nobody saw me come into the house, so I quietly slipped into my room to change clothes and dispose of the evidence. I was about to pull on a clean shirt when I heard the phone ring. My step-mother answered it and my stomach sank, as I knew the story the mother on the other end of the line was filling her in on. I heard her sigh a couple times and then hang up the phone with a sure and definite hand. She came to my room and knocked on the door. "You know you're in trouble. Wait until your father gets home."

I was in my bed pretending to be asleep when I heard him come home from a long day on maneuvers in the field. His heavy boots echoed in the hallway. My step-mother's hushed voice relayed the details of my evening's events. I never heard him raise his voice or question what Mother had just told him. I heard him cross the kitchen, sit down at the table, and eat his late dinner. He put his dishes in the sink, and then I heard him start down the hall towards my room. I pulled the covers up over my head and rolled over to face the wall, hoping he would assume I was asleep and save my punishment for the morning. The heat from my quickening breath was suffocating in the tent of my sheets. I swallowed hard and let a deep breath out from my nose.

He opened the door and light shadowed in from the overhead bulbs in the hallway. He flipped the switch by the door with a swat of his hand. "I know you're not asleep, Mike. Get out of that bed."

I still tried to keep up the act, but he walked over to the bed, grabbed the blankets in his fists, and threw them off of me. Exposed, I sat up and faced him. He still had on his fatigues

from the field; the ankles of his pants bloused in the tightly laced black boots he always wore. He seemed taller than usual, maybe because I was sitting down staring up, maybe because I was terrified.

I know he was explaining something to me about the watermelon patch being that farmer's only source of income — *it was how he fed his family, goddamnit, don't you know better than to destroy what isn't yours?* — but the lecture faded out, thinned to my ears, as I saw him pull a chair up, unfasten his belt from its loops, and take a seat in the middle of the small bedroom. He motioned for me to come towards him, and I slowly got up from the bed.

I didn't cry. In our house, you took your punishment like a man. Flailing about and screaming did nothing but worsen what was coming to you. I walked towards Dad with a blank look on my face — I must have been white as my sheets. I stood in front of him, strong, like I was ready for anything.

His temper was controlled, eerie. He did not raise his voice or lose his composure. My father could make you wish you had never been born with just one look. His dark eyes looked down on me with a stare that momentarily choked my breathing. His presence seemed to fill up the room, punch all the air out of my stomach.

Dad told me he wanted the names of each guy who was out there with me that night. Said he was going to go to each of their houses to collect money to pay the farmer back for the damage we had caused. Dad's sense of right and wrong was about as defined as they come. He would never let an injustice go unpaid.

But if there was anything I had learned that summer, it was that loyalty to friendship is the first and most important rule of the group. I refused to say who had been out in that

watermelon patch with me, so I kept my mouth shut. Then I felt that cracked black belt whip across the backs of my legs.

“Bobby Ratledge,” I let slip, followed by a slap of the belt.

“Monk Rainwater.” Another whip.

“Robert Jackson.” Smack.

“Billy Parker,” and the final blow.

“Bob Hughes.”

I walked back to the edge of the bed and sat down, realizing I had just given up the names of all my comrades. I knew I was facing restriction and the loss of my allowance, but at least the worst was over.

The next day Dad and I went to every boy’s house and took up money to pay the farmer back. One by one I had to face my friends who I had ratted out, feel their reproachful stares from behind screened doors as I stood on front porches feeling like the definition of a turncoat.

We took the money down through the woods to the farmer’s place. The house was a dilapidated cabin. The walls seemed to lean inward and buckle a bit near the foundation. The roof clearly had not been tended to in years.

I walked with Dad up to the farmer’s door and I mumbled out an apology for what we had done. I could feel the man looking down at me, his eyes wrinkled at the corners like little trailing tributaries. The watermelon patch beyond his house lay annihilated in the afternoon, entrails of pink fruit glaring back plaintively in the sun. The old man thanked us for the

payment and I think he shook my dad's hand. I wandered back to the car with my head down, finally ashamed for what I had done.

Thinking back, I can still smell those watermelons cooking in the heat of the field. The taste of that pink fruit still haunts me, cross-remembered with the singe of black leather and the sucker-punch of guilt that I was the center of my little universe's collapse. To this day I won't eat a watermelon — the red heart of its center beats too harshly in retrospection.

\*

## GENTLEMAN

Here you are at an officer's party,  
tailored gray jacket with thin pinstripes,

tie knotted dutifully into position,  
as if holding you upright by its will.

Maybe you smelled of starch and Old Spice,  
underscent of line-dried laundry steeped in cigarettes.

I had forgotten you were gap-toothed,  
your shifty grin rarely captured.

Perhaps the photographer rolled off a joke,  
the punch-line still lingering after the flash.

Your eyes are sidelong and distant,  
wrinkles splayed in the corners.

Fingers grip a sweaty glass:  
Bourbon. Double.



The stories of my dad's childhood have turned into a thing of legend in our family. He has a stock-pile of anecdotes, mostly humorous accounts of boyhood devilment, that he tells in the exact same way every time. He likes to clear the floor with a "Did I ever tell you about the time...?" or a "I'll never forget when..." and everyone knows to brace themselves for a story that they have all heard a million times. My sister and I joke that you could stand behind him and mouth the words of his stories along with him because he never changes up a single detail. The color of someone's hair, the first and last name of every character, the unusually high temperature of a particular summer, the perfect timing of a joke about the prettiest girl in school accidentally farting — all of these things are retold with curiously perfect accuracy.

It's funny the things he forgets now — which piece of gossip he has already shared, a package of hamburger in the freezer, how to drive in bad traffic. These small oversights make me start to worry about Dad's age and if he's starting to slip. But the stories he tells never change, giving me hope that he is still sharper than I give him credit for. Still, sometimes I wonder if his stories actually happened the way he says, or if the telling of the events was just so good he decided to adopt it as truth. Memories are funny that way. The mind alters the past to fit a predetermined present. I have learned to weed out some of the exaggerations.

When Dad tells the "I Won't Eat Watermelons to this Day" story, one I first remember hearing when I couldn't have been more than ten years old, he is quick to emphasize all the funny and interesting parts. Watermelon grenades and being chased by an old farmer with a shotgun are much easier memories than being beaten by your father with a thick, black belt.

Now I know that many aspects of my father's childhood were not the stuff of legends. It is a harsh day of reckoning to become aware that things are not always what they seem. But growing up, I reveled in Dad's stories of the rough-and-tumble kids with whom he made

harmless trouble. I have a vivid childhood memory of running up to Dad's recliner in my flannel nightgown and climbing into his lap. He let me wiggle myself into the crook of his arm, and he told me those stories I loved to hear. It has only been in the last few years that I have gained enough perspective to realize the sad irony of those moments. My father let me sit on his lap and told me stories; his father paid more attention to the dog.

Though Dad likes to laugh about what he romanticizes as a Tom Sawyer-esque childhood, I know that he must remember the gaps in those stories. The times that he was scared and intimidated by his larger-than-life soldier of a father, when he felt unloved and forgotten, the resentment he must have felt toward his younger sister who received much of the attention he craved for himself – those are times he doesn't like to talk about. These are things that only come out in quiet moments after a couple drinks, especially as he has gotten older and is more easily susceptible to nostalgia.

Aging is an unnerving step toward the unknown. Dad, with his morbid sense of humor, jokes often that he has less years on earth than he has already lived. While he is probably right, I think this joke is meant to ward off the seriousness of the future and all of the changes that it will bring. The past is fixed, but Dad recalls it in the present in order to come to terms with events he once thought he might have many more years to work through.

Dad's memories and recollections have created a deep bond between us. Our connection is in the telling of stories. His passion for detail, suspense, and resolution is an enthusiasm that I also share. Perhaps listening to Dad's anecdotes as a child instilled in me an early appreciation for the power of words and created a need to have answers. I heard the adventures of my father's life and now feel an obligation to question the past, to probe, to record the memories that both my father and I hold close. The stories of my dad and his father

have now become my own—they've settled in me, and I can't shake the feeling that I carry the weight of their ghosts.

\*

## FIXATION

I know you are stricken with clocks,  
compelled to wind each lanky hand  
to downbeats of synchronized tock,  
concentrating on the prick and hang:

fractures captured in the stilled spaces.  
Investigation of gears' toothed wheels —  
worriment your finger traces  
into grooves fitted out over years.

Are your clocks reminders of the past?  
Does the ticking call up nervousness,  
uneasy indication that history lasts  
longer than distant years? The purpose

time has for you has gotten lost  
in the enumeration of your ghosts.

## THE ROUTINE

Morning coffee from the same cracked mug,  
the space of time a single cigarette used to fill.  
The day's crossword completed in pen.  
Except, sometimes on Saturdays,  
puzzles are toughest, boxes left blank  
then filled with the frustration of curses.  
A long exhale pushes him out of his chair,  
seat still sagging with his imprint.

He does a few paces around the house,  
floorboards creaking in reliable places.  
A dust mote drifts by in sun from the front window.  
He thinks he should get some air.

The loop of Canal Drive to Bay unfolds under his feet,  
asphalt glittering.  
Sinews and tendons tense from lack of use,  
rickety discs of his spine sigh into position.  
His pace quickens. He becomes suddenly aware  
of wind slipping through his fingers.

Cut grass takes him to 1959, playing football for 71<sup>st</sup>:  
Sweat drips from his dark hair,  
muscles strain,  
the circuitry of sixteen is efficient and dexterous —  
lungs expanding, contracting in gasps,  
heart pumping wildly,  
four chambers beating, a drum.

Alive in the present he thinks,  
*If I could get these knees going,*  
*I could run, I could run.*

Dad is cooking dinner in our family's late '70s-style kitchen, smells of his secret "heat and sweet" chili recipe warming the air. Light from the fluorescent box overhead glints off the gold cabinet and drawer pulls, and the under-counter lights brighten the row of Mom's dusty recipe books by the oven.

He is stirring with a wooden spoon the chili in a big black pot on the stove. The pot is so big, in fact, that we have to keep it in the downstairs pantry because there is no room for it in the cabinets. Whenever Dad decides to cook his tomato and beef-based chili, he always makes enough to feed an army. There are always leftovers, but everyone knows that chili is one of those foods that is always better the next day.

I'm leaning against the countertop on the opposite side of the kitchen from Dad. He gets annoyed when too many people crowd him in the small space, so I avoid the awkward I'll-go-left-if-you-go-right dance and stay out of the way. I stand guard over the makings of grilled cheese sandwiches so that Dad, who always tries to do everything himself, will be forced to let me help with something.

My mom hung a decorative plate on the wall by the stove that she got from my grandma Anne. It is from Germany and "very special for you," as Anne would say. The plate reminds me of my grandfather, at least the one I knew. My recent quest into my family's past sparks a conversation with Dad, one that I believe might show me another side to my grandfather.

Carefully, I lead in with a question that I hope won't seem too probing.

"So did you and Granddaddy Servie ever get along?" I ask him.

Dad stops stirring the chili and takes a taste off the flat, wooden spoon. He thinks for a minute and then: "Our relationship was complicated. He was an extremely private man and

always kept his emotions to himself. It took me a very long time to be able to say that I know my dad loved me. In his own way.” Dad’s answer is honest, but I know he has more to say.

My father and grandfather’s bond was strange and unusual. Though they disagreed on many things and Dad often wondered about his father’s feelings for him, I think the connection between father and son is undeniable on a certain level. At some point, all the things that are on the surface of the relationship go away and the most basic feeling of love is all that remains.

Dinner is almost ready, but Dad is on a roll telling me about the event he considers to be the turning point in the relationship with his father. I know that my grandfather had a difficult time expressing his emotions and communicating how he felt about people. But the story Dad is about to tell me will show me that my grandfather was also the kind of person who saw that if someone was in need, he would help with no questions asked.

In 1982, at age thirty-nine, my father underwent major surgery for a chronic inflammatory bowel disease. He had been fighting the illness for years before being reduced to the absolute necessity of surgery – doctors told him that he would die if he refused the treatment.

Dad’s recovery was intense and grueling. Doctors and nurses were in and out of the room constantly, changing dressings and checking vitals. Dad says it was a humbling experience, being exposed to anyone who happened to be in the room and helpless to do anything for himself.

During this time, nobody was there for Dad like his father. The man drove an hour from Sanford to Chapel Hill to visit him every single day that he was in the hospital. There was never any excuse or reason why he couldn't come—he just knew he was supposed to be there, and he was. Like clockwork, Al showed up to check that his son was being cared for and that he had everything he needed. There was no fanfare or emotional outbursts, just the daily reassurance that only a parent can give to his child.

After being in the hospital for over a week, Dad had grown a beard from days without shaving. He was almost too weak to feed himself, much less tend to matters of vanity. He lay in the bed with tubes running from his hands and stomach, incapacitated and exhausted. Then Albert arrived with his daily checklist.

"How are you feeling today, Mike?" he asked. The question was clinical and sterile, devoid of sentimentality.

"Well, I'd be better if I could get rid of this beard," Dad replied. "But I'm sure shaving isn't in my nurse's job description."

Al suggested, "I can stay in the room if you want to get up here to the sink and try to take care of that," as he pointed to the beard.

Dad nodded, slowly sat up, and put his feet on the floor. He inhaled deeply and stood up, letting the breath out as he straightened. Dragging his IV drip, Dad slid his feet on the floor over to the sink. His hands shook noticeably as he tried to unzip his toiletry bag. He removed his razor and a can of Barbasol from the bag, set them on the shelf above the sink.



Dad squirted some of the Barbasol into his palm, but his hands were shaking so badly that the glob dropped into the sink. Knowing his father had seen the mistake, he tried again, this time getting the shaving cream to his face.

"I can't control these damn hands," Dad said, getting shaving cream into his hair and mouth. He picked up the razor but it, too, slipped from his hands into the white sink basin. Dad had to lean against the counter, had to rest from the small exertion, though he knew his father's eyes were on him.

"Come back over here and lie down," Al said.

Dad obeyed and, quietly, Al arranged a towel under his son's chin. He gathered up the shaving kit and brought it to the bedside.

"Hold your head up," Al said, as he lifted Dad's razor in his wrinkled hand. He began to scrape off the shaving cream with slow, even strokes, careful not to nick Dad's chin. He held another towel in his left hand, and wiped the excess cream onto it between strokes.

Once Dad was clean-shaven, he looked at his father. Al was cleaning up the shaving kit, rinsing the razor in the sink and drying it off on the towel. He packed everything back into Dad's black bag and zipped it closed.

"Thanks," Dad said.

Al replied, "Don't worry about it," and settled into a chair in the corner of the room.

Doctor Sessions entered the room then, clipboard in hand. He glanced at Dad's chart and cleared his throat to report his patient's status. The doctor looked at Al and told him, "Mr. Servie, your son is a tiger."

Dad slowly turned his head to see his father.

As if the doctor had confirmed Al's deepest convictions, he said, "Oh, I know he is," and then left the room to get a cup of coffee.

\*

## WHERE CREDIT IS DUE

Through the living room's picture window  
a scene stolen from Norman Rockwell:  
cardinals in the birdbath,  
snow draping branches,  
berried wreaths on front doors.  
Neighbor children push each other  
down the street, calling out  
over tightly drawn scarves.

Out of view, the trash truck pulls up  
curbside. No one sees you  
salute the garbage man,  
knotted hands offering a Christmas bonus.

In 2003, after my grandfather's death, Dad took the family to help clean out Granddaddy's house. Dad's sister and her two boys had already gone through the house and taken what little furniture and trinkets they wanted, so we were to divvy up the rest of the furniture and decide what should be taken to the dump.

At the time, I was too young to have a need for furniture, so I mainly helped sort through boxes and closets. As I searched through the closet in my grandparents' old bedroom, I noticed Dad holding an index card that he had found in a book on the nightstand.

"What's that?" I asked, a little worried at the look on Dad's face.

He turned the card around to me and walked closer so I could read what it said. In my grandfather's jerky, all-capitals handwriting was a verse transcribed from the Bible:

*Prayer of Jabez*

*Now Jabez called on the God of Israel saying*

*'Oh that You*

*would bless me*

*indeed, and*

*enlarge my*

*territory,*

*that your*

*hand would*

*be with me,*

*and that You*

*would keep me  
from evil,  
that I may  
not cause pain.'*  
*And God  
granted  
his request.*

*1 Chronicles 4:10*

Now, almost eight years since my grandfather's death, a plaque with that verse hangs on the wall in my family's kitchen. Every once in a while, it catches my eye like it did that day in Albert's house when I first saw it.

I can't help but wonder if this verse was a prayer my grandfather said every day. Did he come across it while looking through his Bible? And if so, for what reason had he turned to the Bible in the first place? I think my grandfather, in his last years, was searching for the answers to the questions he was always too scared to verbalize. Was he a bad man? Would his sins be forgiven? What happens to a man who has killed and hurt so many in his life?

The prayer of Jabez is the mantra of those who are searching for forgiveness and in need of absolution. My grandfather's hand, a hand that killed enemies, struck his son, and carried out the deeds of a man who cared not for his own mortality, ultimately and quietly penned the plea that he "might not cause pain."

To realize that he had inflicted pain upon others is an awareness that my grandfather finally gained. But did he wonder if pain was the only contribution he had made to the world?

I take the plaque from its hook on the wall and wipe off the dust. Across the room I see Dad dozing off in his chair, unaware that I've caught him napping. I read through the verse in my head, thinking about my grandfather who read these words years before. Though I'm not one to pray, I send up a message to whoever might be listening: *We're all right. Could you have hoped for more?*

\*

## ALBERT'S POEM

"Old soldiers never die; they just fade away" – General Douglass MacArthur

When I croak, you'll find a note,  
entitled *What to Do in the Event*  
*I Assume Room Temperature.*  
Look in the lining of my latched suitcase.

Follow the directions  
in the order they appear on the list,  
paying close attention to handwritten  
memos in the margins.

Keys to my safety deposit box  
will be taped to the paper.  
Use the keys to obtain your birth mother's  
death certificate and do with it what you like.

My funeral should be handled  
as you see fit, but for God's sake,  
keep the casket closed.  
Nobody wants to crow over me.

## EPILOGUE



I walk up to the entrance of Buffalo Jonesboro Cemetery, crunching last night's snow underfoot. One of Sanford's oldest Presbyterian cemeteries, this place is filled with relics of the past. An east wind rattles loose chains against the filigreed gate, and I remember to pull up my collar. I stuff my hands down into my pockets and pull my shoulders up against the cold. Drawn into the grave-maze, I squint against the sun's reflection off the northern embankment of the cemetery and push ahead as if pulled from inside. I leave my muddy footprints from the gate to the graves, a duck-footed trail that breaks up the white evenness of the morning.

If I listen closely I can hear the crows' calls before their trilling voices are absorbed into the surrounding snow. The black birds preen droplets from their glossy feathers and flit nervously on their branches, disturbing the laden boughs. The snow dust explodes as it hits the headstones below. There is water nearby; I can hear geese paddling and honking as if in conversation with the dead.

The marble stones jut out of the ground at varying heights, the gray rocks stained with sediment or still shining like new. They are ornamented with offerings: a Rubik's cube for a son, a tattered Barbie for a daughter—plastic trinkets left for the dead. Wreaths and red plastic baubles litter the ground, the forgotten aftermath of last Christmas. Tiny American flags surround a veteran. We both shiver in the wind.

I turn off the path and superstitiously tip-toe around the outlines of bodies, having to balance myself once or twice with a finger against the waist-high stones.

I pause and look up to catch my bearings. From where I'm standing, I can make out a chapel's steeple through the trees. I'm close enough to see its understated white crucifix just skimming the skyline—a talisman in the background of a scene lined with the grief of the living.

I continue down through the center of the cemetery until I reach the grave that knows my bones. The headstone of my grandfather bears only our family name in letters as bold and definite as death itself. Ice glints in the crevices of the engraving, forming crystals so blinding they rival the marble's glassy finish. Only an overturned plastic wreath, its wire legs pronged up out of the snow, shows any sign that this grave is not forgotten. I wonder who brought it here. I scan the snow for the footstone I know is there. With fingers red and stiff from the cold, I brush the metal plate clear to read the only information given about a man I hardly knew:

Albert Servie Jr.

SGM Us Army

WWII Korea Vietnam

Feb 1 1923 Mar 26 2003

Silver Star Bronze Star Purple Heart

I think his secrets must be buried with him. His stories went down into Sanford's red clay and never came out. I turn an ear toward the ground, thinking for a minute I might hear the keys turning, the secrets of the dead swirling just below the snow. I can imagine my old white-haired grandfather turning away from me in his grave, shadowing the remaining traces of a man I don't think anybody will ever understand.

